

Danny Mazelli was one of 20 seniors from New York state who were featured in Academy Award-winner Robin Lehman's *Forever Young* documentary. Mazelli tuned pinos.



Pilot Fred Ennis was 82 during the 1981 making of *Forever Young*.

Roland Lindemann founded the Catskill Game Farm, which operated from 1933 until 2006. The 1981 documentary *Forever Young* about "vital, interesting seniors" was made by Pittsford's Robin Lehman.



Photos provided by George Eastman House

# His time has come

## At 73, Pittsford filmmaker honored by Eastman House

STUART LOW  
STAFF WRITER

One afternoon nearly 30 years ago, Oscar winner Robin Lehman found himself pondering a thorny question: What's good about growing old?

"My mom and dad weren't doing very well," recalls Lehman, 73, who grew up in New York City and has lived in Pittsford for the past two decades. "I thought about making a documentary about vital, interesting seniors who were doing OK."

His 1981 documentary, *Forever Young*, gets its first movie theater screening Friday at George Eastman House. Also featured in the Dryden Theatre program are his 1970s short films about an African volcano and underwater life off Sudan's coast. (That's fire, water and aging in one action-packed evening.)

Although *Forever Young* took three decades to reach the big screen, it couldn't appear at a better time. Millions of baby boomers are biting their fingernails as they try to plan a reasonably fulfilling retirement in tough times.

Documentaries on nature are where Lehman, to this point, has gained his fame, if you can call it that. He has won two Academy Awards but is hardly a household name. His work is seen mostly at colleges and libraries, with a few clips available on YouTube.

George Eastman House has been

trying to remedy that neglect. Last January, its Dryden Theatre screened his Academy Award winners *Don't* (a study of monarch butterflies that won in 1974) and *The End of the Game* (an unflinching view of wildlife on the African savannah that won in 1975).

His lack of public recognition is no mystery to Caroline Frick Page, the museum's curator of motion pictures.

"It's symptomatic of independent filmmaking generally," she says. "Hollywood markets celebrities. When films don't have a corporate entity behind them, they often end up sitting in a garage somewhere. Robin has never tried to be 'Hollywood.' He uses his own very successful approach with eclectic topics."

Those topics have taken him to shark-infested seas, eruptions of lava and gentler flows of molten glass at the Corning Museum of Glass. From the beginning, his self-financed projects came about largely by accident.

His first filming was done in Spain after a friend invited him to watch Kirk Douglas and Yul Brynner making a pirate movie (*The Light at the Edge of the World*).

"My friend was shooting a documentary about that movie's production," says Lehman, who was 30 at the time. "He asked me, 'Why not roam around the set and take some pictures?'"

"I had a blast. When I saw all the footage shot, I thought maybe I should have a go at it professionally."

He created a short film portraying the wordless, poetic voyage of a model airplane flying out to sea. Inspired by the French classic *The Red Balloon*, it



Lehman

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# Filmmaker

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became a prototype for his later documentaries.

They rely on purposeful sequences of images and sounds that propel the storyline. Although they require meticulous editing, they often have their start in a moment of serendipity.

"Don't began when I saw a Monarch butterfly flying down Park Avenue," he says, referring to Manhattan's hub of affluence. "Then I saw a Monarch land on the rump of a horse! It would have taken a thousand lifetimes to create that shot."

To accompany the butterfly's life story, he chose Chopin's *Andante Spianato* for piano. Again, happenstance worked its magic.

"During a minor passage, the butterfly got caught in a spider web," he says. "As the piece changed to major, the butterfly got out of the web."

*Hotshot*, a documentary to be screened Friday, also was totally unplanned. In 1974, Lehman set out to film gorillas in the Congo when he heard about an active volcano nearby. He hiked up to the rim, peered over and swapped the apes for hot



Provided by George Eastman House

Henry Strauss, featured in *Forever Young*, kept up his interests despite his multiple sclerosis.

lava.

"It was love at first sight," he says. "I'd call the Niyagongo a friendly volcano — very predictable, with a mild eruption every two hours. Inside, it sounded like a freight train going by."

In *Forever Young*, Lehman focused on New York state seniors who enjoy turbocharging their "golden years." Among the 20 that he filmed were an 82-year-old pilot, a 75-year-old skydiver and a man who started his own zoo.

Characteristically, Lehman remains invisible throughout the film. He lets the seniors give a full, unmediated account of their lives to the audi-

ence.

"To this day, I can hear them speaking," he says. "They talk about the things that make them come alive. These people

## If you go

**What:** Local filmmaker Robin Lehman introduces three of his documentaries: *Hotspot*, *See* and *Forever Young*.

**Where:** George Eastman House's Dryden Theatre, 900 East Ave.

**When:** 8 p.m. Friday.

**Admission:** \$7 (\$5 for students).

**Call:** (585) 271-3361 or go to <http://dryden.eastmanhouse.org>.

keep me going."

When not shooting films, Lehman makes artistic glass paperweights in his private studio. He also has a splendid collection of contemporary art glass in his elegant home, shared by his wife, Marie (an Eastman School of Music administrator) and their teenage children, Rolf

and Morgan.

Lehman has advice for other local seniors seeking an emotionally sustaining pastime.

"Do whatever makes your juices flow," he recommends.

"Maybe you'll write poetry, or go to the Internet and learn new chess moves.

"Some people may go ice boating. But if you just decide to spend your time sleeping, the bed will kill you." □

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